MOUNTAIN RIVER MEN

By Frances Judge

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MOUNTAIN RIVER MEN

A Story of Early Jackson Hole

by Frances Judge

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FOREWORD

"Mountain River Men" is the authentic story of the Menor Brothers and Bill Menor's Ferry, a bit of the colorful history of the early days in Jackson Hole.

This ferryboat is a unique craft, typical in many ways of pioneer structures of its type. It was abandoned when the first highway bridge across the Snake River near the ferry site was completed in 1927.

In 1949, the ferry was reconstructed by the Jackson Hole Preserve, Incorporated, dedicated and launched with appropriate ceremonies on August 20 of that year.

For the past several years the National Park Service has operated the ferry during the summer months, thus providing visitors to Grand Teton National Park an opportunity to enjoy the experience of a river crossing as it was made in pioneer times. Ferries of this type are rapidly disappearing from the American scene.

The Grand Teton Natural History Association takes pleasure in presenting this account of the Menors and the part these rugged individualists played in the history of Jackson Hole.

"This ain't W. D. Menor talking, this is H. H. Menor talking by God. Holy Savior, yes!"

Both Bill and Holiday carried a mouthful of oaths that spilled out whenever they spoke. They cursed their friends and neighbors, they cursed each other, and they cursed themselves. But to lighten this burden of words when women were around, Holiday would say, before a sentence, in the middle of a sentence, or at the end of one, "Holy Savior, yes!" or "Holy Savior, no!"

Bill never bothered to lighten his profanity.

Yet, in spite of cursing, they were men of dignity.

Everyone in Jackson Hole knew Bill and Holiday Menor. They were as much a part of the country as the Snake River or the Teton Mountains. The type of men they were brought them here.

Then, as now, Jackson Hole had a marked collection of people. They were unshackled and they had color. Strength was intensified. Weakness was vivid. Bill and Holiday were plain spoken, strong-dyed individualists. They belonged here.

The Menor brothers came originally from Ohio. They were tall men. Bill, eleven years older than his brother, was thin and long-boned. His nose and sharp eyes were like an old eagle's. Holiday's long body sagged a little. He had a grizzled beard, long, shrewd nose, and amused, gray eyes. He prospected in Montana before coming to Jackson Hole. "My partner's name was Mean, but I was Menor," he would say. He claimed to have made over one hundred and twenty thousand dollars in one prospect. When asked what happened to the money, he always said, "Wine, women and song." He talked of going off to Old Mexico, prospecting, but he never went. There was too much living to be done on the banks of the Snake River.

Bill Menor, coming to this valley in 1892, settled on a homestead by squatter's right. He settled where the Snake River hauls toward the great mountains. He was the first to homestead on the west bank of the Snake River, under the Tetons. He built a low, log house among the cottonwoods on the shore of the river, collected a cow or two, and a horse; a few chickens; plowed up sage and made a field; planted a garden; built a blacksmith shop; and in time opened a small store where he sold a few groceries, a lot of Bull Durham, overalls, tin pans, fish hooks and odds and ends.

And he immediately constructed a ferry to ply the unreliable Snake. Before settling in the valley, he spent ten days with John Shive and John Cherry "on the Buffalo." At that time he considered establishing a ferry somewhere along the Buffalo, but after talking with Cherry and Shive, he decided on the Snake River. And his decision was wise and farsighted.

Many settlers cut timber on Bill's side of the river, so the ferry was welcome. There were times when it was the only crossing within a forty mile stretch up and down the river. Once in awhile there was no crossing

at all, when the river was "in spate" and Bill refused to risk the ferry. At such a time people were forced to go up one side of the river to Moran, cross the toll bridge, and travel down the other side—80 miles to travel 8.

The ferry, a railed platform on pontoons, was carried directly across the river by the current, guided by ropes attached to an overhead cable. The cable was secured to a massive log—called a "dead man." The ferry was large enough to carry a four-horse team, provided the lead team was unhooked and led to the side of the wagon.

Bill Menor charged fifty cents for a team, twenty-five cents for a horse and rider. A foot passenger was carried free if a vehicle was crossing.

In those early days almost everyone who came to cross the ferry around mealtime was invited to eat. If the river was too high for safe crossing and the persons who wanted to cross were in no particular hurry, Bill would keep them two or three days, bedding them and feeding them generously until the waters subsided, and charging them only the slim ferry fee. "When you see them rollers in the middle of the river, I won't cross," he would say, apologizing in his grouchy way for keeping people around.

Anyone who stayed with Bill had to be washed and combed and ready to leap at the table at twelve noon and six sharp. Early in the morning, as soon as the fire was built, he yelled at them, saying, "Come on, get out of bed. Don't lay there until the flies blow you!" Nothing angered him more than to have someone late for a meal, unless it was to put a dish or a pan in the wrong place. Bill had a place for everything and everything had to be in place. Once the Roy Van Vlecks spent the night with Bill. They washed the morning dishes before ferrying over the river. Bill, leaning against the kitchen doorcasing, criticized and cursed because the frying pans shouldn't go here and the kettles shouldn't go there. Yet he did not offer to put them on their proper nails or even show where they belonged.

That was Bill, and his neighbors understood. He was a man boiled down to his primary colors.

Bill was generally accommodating, but if he were particularly out of humor, and had a natural distaste for a person who came along after six in the evening, he would refuse either to ferry him over the river or keep him for the night. He apparently got satisfaction out of being downright mean to a few individuals.

When the Snake is high, it is ferocious. It boils, seethes, growls, beats its breast, and carries with it everything it can reach.

Once it got Bill.

A huge, uprooted tree swept against the ferry with such force that the ropes broke and the boat was carried downstream, taking Bill with it. After a quick trip, the ferry grounded on a submerged sandbar. Neighbors gathered and conferred and hurried about, trying to rescue Bill. He stood on the ferry violently cursing the rescue crew and acting, in general, as though they alone were to blame for the high water and his predicament.

Holiday Menor came to Jackson Hole about 1905. He lived for a number of years with his brother, Bill. But the disposition of each was cut on the bias, and the two disagreed over a neighbor. So Holiday took up land

on the east shore and built his houses directly across from Brother Bill, and let the river run between them. Like a great many individualists, Bill and Holiday considered strong hate a mark of character, so they did not speak to each other for two years. Nevertheless, they were proud of each other, and the name of one always cropped up in the conversation of the other, mixed well with curses. And each watched across the river for the other, to make sure all was right on the opposite shore.

One Christmas the brothers were invited to the Bar B C Ranch for dinner. It was Holiday's birthday. Neither knew the other was to be there. When each arrived he was given a strong drink of whiskey to insure amiability. The two brothers shook hands over the Christmas table. Ever after they were on speaking terms.

And sometimes they spoke too freely, shaking fists and cursing each other over the river. There was gusto in their living.

Though Bill read hardly more than the daily paper that came to him, Holiday subscribed to a number of magazines. He read seven long months of the year and "talked it out" the other five. He argued politically with everyone, whether they would argue or not. "Now, mind you, I'm telling you, this ain't W. D. talking, this is H. H. Menor talking, by God." And for emphasis he would bang things with a stick of stove wood. Once he came down on the red hot stove with his bare fist and for a short while political views were unimportant.

Gradually the land was taken up by homesteader or Government leaser, and the Menors were surrounded with neighbors. Then, as now, persons living ten or fifteen miles away were considered close neighbors. Everybody in the valley knew everybody else, or at least knew stories about him. For Holiday to have a close neighbor other than Bill was intriguing. Mrs. Evelyn Dornan, a Pennsylvania woman, homesteaded on the east bank, and her buildings were only a quarter of a mile below Holiday's. She called him the Patriarch of the Ford, and he called her the Widow down the River.

To have Mrs. Dornan ask how he prepared some dish filled him with pride. He enjoyed giving away his recipes. He would say, "You take two handfuls of flour, that is, and a pinch of salt, that is . . . " All his recipes were generously seasoned with "that is's." He was an excellent cook and loved to have his friends eat with him.

But there was the rooster episode . . .

Bill had a beautiful barred Plymouth Rock rooster; a huge single-combed domestic fowl with graceful feathers in its tail, and pride in its walk. But Holiday's rooster had only two feathers in its tail, its body was completely bare, and it had no pride.

It was a sad sight.

The Widow down the River laughed every time she looked at Holiday's rooster and wanted to take a picture of it. But Holiday said, "No."

"Holy Savior, no! I don't want that rooster shown as an example of what is raised on my ranch."

Fearing Mrs. Dornan would take a picture of the fowl, he killed it, cooked it, and invited her to eat it with him. He never once thought that the bird might have been defeathered by disease. Mrs. Dornan ate rooster and pretended to enjoy it. She was an understanding neighbor.

Both Bill and Holiday raised excellent gardens. To be fairly safe against frost they never planted until the snow melted up to a certain level in the Tetons. They raised many vegetables. Their cauliflowers were as big as footstools. They raised currants and raspberries galore, and made jelly and jam. And they raised flowers. Holiday always had pansies on the north side of his buildings. He called them tansies. He and Bill always gave freely of their vegetables, berries and flowers.

During the wild berry season, Bill would charge "huckleberry rates" to the local people—fare one way only—when the berries were ripe along the ridges and around the lakes under the Tetons.

Holiday would can between fifty and sixty quarts of huckleberries during a season. And since he drank periodically he made wine. At any rate that is what he called it. He would make it of berries, raisins, prunes, beets, plus whatever else was handy—and never wait for the mixture to mature.

It would knock his hat off.

At five one summer morning, neighbors stopped at Holiday's, returning from a dance. They were cold. They needed a stimulant, but Holiday had no wine. He had drunk it all. So they drank a cocktail made of gin and huckleberry juice—half and half. After finishing their drinks, two young men in the party decided to shoot a rabbit for breakfast. They did.

"We shot it right in the eye," one said, holding up what was left of the rabbit.

The hind parts were shot away, slick as a whistle.

That is what gin and wild huckleberry juice did to a rabbit. Holy Savior, yes! What might Holiday's wine have done to it?

Holiday enjoyed the summer visitors in Jackson Hole. Bill probably enjoyed them also, but they could not lift him from his natural state of grouchiness. Once, after looking over the miles of sage that covered the levels of land that rise from the river to the mountains, an Eastern lady said to Bill, "Mr. Menor, what do you raise in this country?"

Bill, a dyed-in-the-wool bachelor, looked at her and said, "Hell and kids and plenty of both."

He enjoyed startling people.

And he apparently knew what the "outsider" thought of a Jackson Holer. In 1915 he made a trip to the World's Fair with his neighbors, Jim and Mary Budge. When they had boarded a San Francisco-bound train, after a strenuous trek out of Jackson Hole, both Jim and Bill felt in need of a long drink of whiskey. Entering the smoker with their concealed bottle they found one other man there. They did not like his looks and they felt no need of him. Bill walked up and looked down at him with his eagle stare. "Do you know where we're from?" he said. "JACKSON HOLE!"

The man made a quick escape.

Though Holiday was more jovial than Brother Bill, his neighbors steered clear of him when he was in the process of making lime. He made and sold lime to neighboring ranchers. Some of them, like Bill, whitewashed their houses inside and out with it. Holiday chinked his houses with it. He also used it as a cure-all for man and beast. When he made lime he had to keep a steady fire going for thirty-odd hours in the kiln just behind the house in the bank. During these hours he was not fit company for man or beast. But his neighbors accepted his limy disposition as a necessary part of the process. Holy Savior, yes. What of it?

When late fall brought bitter winds, heavy fogs and snow, the ferry was beached for the winter. From then on all teams had to ford the river. A little platform was hung from the river cable to accommodate foot passengers. It would hold three or four at one time. The passengers mounted the platform from a ladder and sat down. Bill released the car; with a quick swoosh it ran down the slack in the cable where it dipped within ten feet of the river. Then the frightened passengers would laboriously haul themselves up the relaxed cable to the opposite shore.

In later years, when travel became heavier, a winter bridge was flung across the main channel. Putting in the winter bridge was the responsibility of everyone, friend and enemy alike. When the time was ripe, word was sent to nearby ranchers. On this day of days all cars and wagons were stopped and the occupants asked to help with the construction. If they protested, Holiday would say, "Do you want to use the winter bridge? Well, then help put it in!"

Giving a hot meal to the crew that laid the winter bridge became traditional with Mrs. Dornan. While they carried logs and hammered, she baked and fried and boiled.

To find a crew to lay the winter bridge was never very difficult, but to find a few who were willing to help remove it in the spring was a very different matter. The ferry was running full blast. No one needed the bridge. No one was enthusiastic. This was spring; time to plant and build and plan. No time to tear down. To get men to the river for this seemingly useless task was worse than trying to get a fresh cow on the ferry without her calf.

So it came to pass that one spring there was only Holiday and one other man to move the bridge pole by pole, nail by nail, oath by oath. As a result any log that looked too heavy for two men to lift was rolled into the river. "To hell with it," Holiday would say, and dust off his hands. "Holy Savior, yes!"

In 1918, Bill sold his ranch and the ferry. The new owners raised the prices. Soon after the ferry changed hands, a Jackson Holer came along on foot. Finding the fare doubled he leaped, fully dressed and full of anger into the Snake River and swam across. The pilot stood on the ferry, cursing the swimmer and yelling that he hoped he would drown.

Bill sold because he had enough of high water and low water. He had enough of fog, rain, wind, snow, and sunshine on the Snake.

Yet he could not drag himself away. He hung around his house and at twelve noon, and six sharp he would pace what was no longer his

floor and swear because the meal was not ready. Mrs. Dornan, who was then boarding at the Menor place, would get him to the door and say, "Go on out, Bill. The meal will be good when you get it." But this was no longer home. At last he dragged himself away from the ranch, away from the valley. He moved to California.

In 1925 the Gros Ventre slide occurred which brought tourists flocking to Jackson Hole. The great rump of Sheep Mountain had dropped away, damming the Gros Ventre River and forming a lake four miles long. This landslide occurred directly across the valley from Menor's Ferry and brought the owners a landslide of business. But Bill had sold and left the country.

By 1927 a huge bridge spanned the Snake not far from the Menor houses, so the ferry was beached and in time dismantled. But before the bridge was completed, Holiday had sold his land and followed his brother to California.

Now they were old men.

Just before leaving the valley, Holiday bought a new suit and a new hat. He stayed a few days in Jackson at the Crabtree Hotel. One night, while he was in town, the ladies of some organization were having a dinner in the Club House—the upper floor of a huge frame building. An outside stairway led up to the hall. Holiday happened along just as a woman stepped out on the stairway with a pan full of dishwater. She threw the water all over him. Holiday walked on to the hotel, wet and violently angry. After a string of oaths that would reach from one end of the Snake River to the other and all its tributaries, he said to Mrs. Crabtree, "A man gets dressed up once in seventeen years and a woman has to climb up above him and throw dishwater all over him. Why couldn't it have been a minute earlier or a minute later? Hell!" And he stomped off to his room.

Shortly before Bill's death, Mrs. Dornan found the two brothers in San Diego, in a little hospital on Juniper Street. Bill was bedridden, but his mind was keen. He cursed the bed in which he lay, and talked of Jackson Hole. A sympathetic nurse had pinned on the wall at the foot of his bed a crude oil painting of the Teton Mountains.

Holiday was able to be up and about, but his mind had begun to fade. Mrs. Dornan took him mahogany "tansies" like those he once grew. Knowing he would never see her again, he gave her a handkerchief with his initials in one corner. H. H. M.

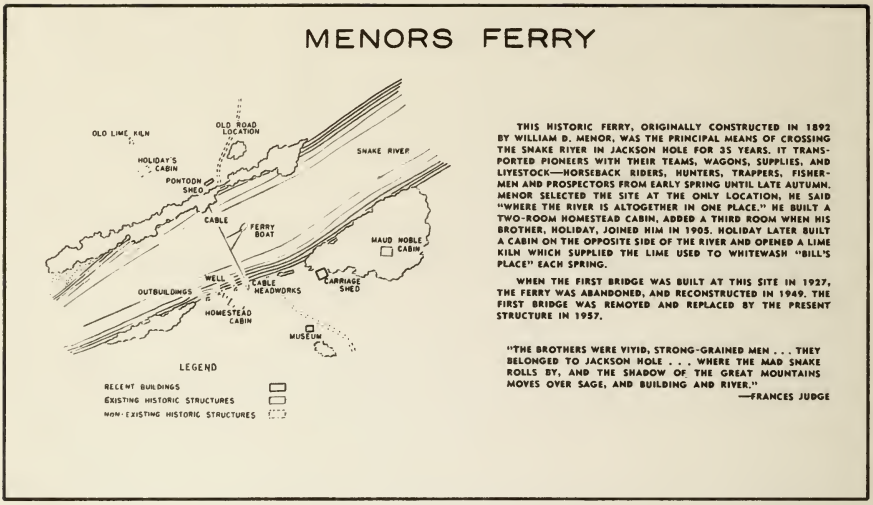
She knew that never again would she hear him say, "Now mind you, I'm telling you. This ain't W. D. Menor talking, this is H. H. Menor talking, by God!"

The brothers died within a year of each other.

But living or dead they belonged to Jackson Hole. They were vivid, strong-grained men.

Holiday's buildings are gone. But Bill's low, whitewashed house still stands.

And the mad Snake rolls by, and the shadow of the great mountains moves over sage, and building and river.


MENORS FERRY
OLD LIME KILN
OLD ROAD LOCATION
HOLIDAY'S CABIN
PONTOON SHED
SNAKE RIVER
CABLE
FERRY BOAT
MAUD NOBLE CABIN
WELL
CABLE HEADWORKS
CARRIAGE SHED
OUTBUILDINGS
HOMESTEAD CABIN
MUSEUM
LEGEND
RECENT BUILDINGS
EXISTING HISTORIC STRUCTURES
NON-EXISTING HISTORIC STRUCTURES
THIS HISTORIC FERRY, ORIGINALLY CONSTRUCTED IN 1892 BY WILLIAM D. MENOR, WAS THE PRINCIPAL MEANS OF CROSSING THE SNAKE RIVER IN JACKSON HOLE FOR 35 YEARS. IT TRANSPORTED PIONEERS WITH THEIR TEAMS, WAGONS, SUPPLIES, AND LIVESTOCK—HORSEBACK RIDERS, HUNTERS, TRAPPERS, FISHERMEN AND PROSPECTORS FROM EARLY SPRING UNTIL LATE AUTUMN. MENOR SELECTED THE SITE AT THE ONLY LOCATION, HE SAID "WHERE THE RIVER IS ALTOGETHER IN ONE PLACE." HE BUILT A TWO-ROOM HOMESTEAD CABIN, ADDED A THIRD ROOM WHEN HIS BROTHER, HOLIDAY, JOINED HIM IN 1905. HOLIDAY LATER BUILT A CABIN ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE RIVER AND OPENED A LIME KILN WHICH SUPPLIED THE LIME USED TO WHITEWASH "BILL'S PLACE" EACH SPRING.
WHEN THE FIRST BRIDGE WAS BUILT AT THIS SITE IN 1927, THE FERRY WAS ABANDONED, AND RECONSTRUCTED IN 1949. THE FIRST BRIDGE WAS REMOVED AND REPLACED BY THE PRESENT STRUCTURE IN 1957.
"THE BROTHERS WERE VIVID, STRONG-GRAINED MEN . . . THEY BELONGED TO JACKSON HOLE . . . WHERE THE MAD SNAKE ROLLS BY, AND THE SHADOW OF THE GREAT MOUNTAINS MOVES OVER SAGE, AND BUILDING AND RIVER."
—FRANCES JUDGE

Wayside signs similar to the one shown here are located at many sites along roadsides throughout the Park. Their purpose is to aid the park visitor in becoming more familiar with the natural and historic features of Grand Teton National Park.

The signs have been erected in the Park as a part of MISSION 66, a 10-year conservation, development, and improvement program of the National Park Service. It was launched in 1956 and was scheduled for completion in 1966, the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the National Park Service. The program proposes to so develop, staff, and improve the Parks, Monuments, Historic Sites, and other areas managed by the National Park Service as to permit their wisest use; maximum enjoyment for those who use them; and maximum preservation of the scenic, scientific, and historic resources which give these areas their distinction.